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PROGRAM From the Editor's Desk

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SUBJECT Admiral Stansfield Turner

RICHARD HEFNER: I'm Richard Hefner. Each week I chair our editorial board, as we bring those who make the news of the world together with the editors and the commentators who interpret it, who shape the news, mould it, who do or do not make it part of our public awareness, our public opinion.

Joining me today is Robert Bartley, Editor of the Wall Street Journal. Also with me here at the Editor's Desk is Mitchell Levitas, Editor of the New York Times' Sunday Week in Review. And our guest in Washington is Admiral Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence in the Jimmy Carter Administration.

It is not its intelligence-gathering activities, secret or otherwise, that have brought the CIA's public reputation into question in recent years. Rather, it is role it is said to play in so-called secret wars, in Cuba, earlier in Vietnam, now perhaps in Central America, that concerns at least a Congress that wants in on the larger, and what it insists must be the public, issue of war and peace.

It may be appropriate, then, to ask Admiral Turner whether in this matter of secret war, President Reagan uses the CIA any differently than Jimmy Carter did. Admiral?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Well, I think the Reagan Administration has made one serious mistake in using the Central Intelligence Agency in covert action. That is, getting involved in a covert action on which there was not general consensus in America. Specifically, working against the government of Nicaragua, allegedly using supporters of former dictator Somoza. I don't think the United States was united on being willing to

use Somozans to overthrow Marxist Sandinistas.

HEFNER: Does that mean that every time the CIA has used covert actions, it's been in the interest of what a majority of Americans have wanted?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Since 1976, when we've had good oversight of intelligence, if you tried a covert action on which there wasn't consensus, it was going to leak. There are enough people today who have to know about these, both in the Administration and in the Congress, that if it is highly divisive, it's going to leak and it won't be covert. And therefore you can't have a covert action when it's a public knowledge.

HEFNER: Bob Bartley, editorially, you've had some things to say about that.

ROBERT BARTLEY: I take it, Admiral, you think there is a place for covert action in the CIA.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, yes. Yes.

BARTLEY: Could you give us a hypothetical, for example? I mean why do we need covert action?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well now, let's understand, Bob, that covert action is not always overthrowing governments. For instance, it's propaganda that puts out the American opinion on different subjects, but not attributable to the United States. There are a lot of countries where they just can't get straight news. But if they get it from the Voice of America, they think it is biased. So that's a very legitimate covert activity.

Another is financial support for democratic parties in countries where there is communist-financed opposition giving them a hard time. And yet those democratic parties may not want to acknowledge that they're receiving support from the United States. That may be counterproductive politically for them.

Then, I think, when there are instances when the country genuinely sees other nations being overrun by communist military power, for instance, that they may be willing to unite together in providing support to the genuine freedom fighters who are opposing such communist intervention.

MITCHELL LEVIJAS: Admiral Turner, I gather from what you've said in your opening remarks and now that your objection in American involvement in Nicaragua is less a matter of principle than a matter of practice.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

LEVITAS: (A) It was leaked. And (B) we shouldn't be backing Somozistas against Sandinistas.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's absolutely correct. I find there is no principle, no rule of morals that governs international behavior of nations.

LEVITAS: Well, wouldn't a covert action almost always be divisive, to the point of having its cover blown, where the object was to involve America in an attempt to topple a foreign government?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I certainly think there must be cases where the foreign government is so onerous to the United States that if you could do it by covert action, the country would unite behind it. Now, most of those cases -- take Castro in Cuba. The CIA's previous efforts to do that, to overthrow Castro by covert action, just didn't work. And I don't think covert action will work there today. So I would not recommend it. But if someone came up with a covert plan that was really useful, could be done, I'd be all for it.

BARTLEY: Well, Admiral, don't you think it would surely leak?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think that in the case of Cuba, it probably would, because of the past history there. But I certainly can think that there might be other instances that would develop in the world where some nation was really causing the United States a lot of trouble; and if we had the capability, we could use it and the country would unite behind it.

LEVITAS: Let me put this question on another level. Do you think that the Sandinist government is a threat to the security of the United States, to the point where deep U.S. involvement is warranted or wise?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I do not. I don't think the Sandinista government is firmly in power. The Sandinista...

LEVITAS: Not lately, anyway.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, but even without CIA support, there are two factions of Sandinistas who've broken off and are now trying to unseat the Marxist government there. Marxism, Cuba, the Soviet Union cannot satisfy the economic-social aspirations of the Nicaraguan people. They threw out Somoza. They got something just as bad now. It's not going to satisfy them.

The problem will take care of itself. We can try to contain it. But I don't think it's so critical that we need to try to use the dirty tricks department on it, with, I think, some very serious consequences I'd like to outline for you if you would like it.

LEVITAS: Go ahead.

ADMIRAL TURNER: First of all, last December the Congress passed a law saying you can use covert action there, but not to overthrow the government; only to try to stop the flow of arms. Well, the line there is very thin between one and the other, and people are already accusing the CIA of breaking that law. I don't think the people in the CIA are the kind who break laws. And this is bad for their image, their reputation in the country, which we tried so hard over the last few years to bring back again.

HEFNER: Admiral, do you think that the CIA has now broken the law in that regard?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't think so. But I think they will constantly be accused of it. Because, after all, the best way to stop the Nicaraguan government from sending arms to El Salvador is to throw the Nicaraguan government out of power. But that's against the law.

HEFNER: Well, if it is the best way, why are restraining ourselves?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Because the Congress has said so. I believe, for the reasons we discussed before, that they perceive this to be giving the United States a bad image throughout Latin and South America, an image of wanting to put Somoza-type people back in power again. And that is hurting the United States, because what we should be doing in that area is buttressing Mexico and Panama, which are countries of great importance to us, where Nicaragua is very unimportant. And we can't work closely with those other two countries if they see us trying to put dictators back into power.

BARTLEY: Admiral, if you were a congressman, how would you vote on that restriction, yes or no?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I would vote on the restriction that was passed, the Boland Amendment. But now what I would do if I were the Congress, I would pass the law that they proposed in the House of Representatives just cutting off all covert activity down there. It's gone too far, in terms of becoming public. We've got to cut our losses and get out.

And you know what's also happening that's really going to hurt intelligence here, is both of the Intelligence Committees of the Congress are now proposing that in the future they must be notified in advance of any covert action taking place. That is going to be a serious curb on the CIA's capability to do genuine covert actions that the country wants done.

HEFNER: Admiral Turner, let's break away from the Editor's Desk for a moment, and then we'll come back.

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LEVITAS: Admiral Turner, I'm afraid I'm a bit confused. You've just said that it would be a curb that would be unwise for Congress to be pre-informed of covert activities undertaken by the CIA.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

LEVITAS: And yet you've also said that CIA activities should have more or less the unanimous support of the American people, or at least the Congress, or, one assumes, the Intelligence Committees of Congress, before they're undertaken, lest they be blown and become divisive.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

LEVITAS: Can you resolve that contradiction?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Certainly. I think an Administration should be smart enough to know, by its own understanding of public opinion in a country, that an issue will sell or won't sell. And it shouldn't undertake one that won't sell, as the Nicaraguan one has not.

But during the Carter Administration, we undertook some covert actions which I would not have even proposed had I been required to give prior notification to the Congress. And the simple reason is that you cannot look a man in the eye and say, "Go into a situation where you might lose your life. I'm only going up on Capitol Hill and notify 30 or 40 people."

Now, I don't care whether those 30 or 40 people are on Capitol Hill or in the CIA. You can't be a responsible person and put a man's life at risk and tell 30 or 40 people more than absolutely need to know in order to conduct the operation.

LEVITAS: But how do you know that it's not going to be divisive? There were serious people who thought that the Bay of Pigs was the wrong thing to attempt, even though it was undermined by trying to do it with less equipment and less manpower

than was originally envisaged by the CIA, that it was wrong in principle and lousy in practice. But that's not the point.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, in the first place, there are only a few cases where you don't want to notify them in advance, and those are ones where it's a very time-urgent operational issue, generally. Something like trying to overthrow a government takes a long time, and there's no way that you can or should hold that back, because there isn't this element of timeliness, this element of human life being so much at stake.

So, I don't think it's really an issue that is a serious one at all. I believe that the Congress can be notified most of the time in advance. But if they pass a law and say that it has to be in advance, they're going to deny the country some important opportunities.

You take a situation like the hostage rescue effort. to the extent that there was any covert action required with that, you simply could not people who weren't required to know that information.

BARTLEY: Well, Admiral, I have to agree with Mike that it -- it seems to me that your position here gives you kind of the worst of both worlds. I mean you're not willing to rule out covert action, but you say that the test ought to be whether or not there's a consensus, and the real test of that is whether it leaks. It just seems to me, in the realities of the country today, you're giving a veto power to a group that's very opposed to any kind of covert activity. So that you have a position in which you're not willing to rule out covert activities, but you impose conditions that make them impossible to carry out.

How do you react to that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I really just don't understand your argument. I'm not imposing any conditions that make it impossible to carry out. In fact, I'm saying in those cases where it's extremely sensitive, you don't notify the Congress in advance.

BARTLEY: At least it would, as a practical matter, rule out trying to overthrow a hostile government. Is that right?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, not if the country would gener -- would, as a whole, support overthrowing that particular hostile government. I think that the government should go ahead with the covert action if it would be useful, if that is a very important thing for our country.

BARTLEY: But, clearly, there are elements in the

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country who would not unite behind any -- I happen to think a relatively small minority, but nonetheless some in the country and in the government who would not unite behind any such plan. Don't you agree with that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, yes. But, you see, we're not talking about telling the country. We're talking about telling the committees of the Congress. And they have been, in my opinion, quite responsible in this regard.

HEFNER: Admiral, I think that Bob is probably referring to the committees of the Congress too. I don't want to put words in his mouth. But I wondered how you reacted to an editorial assessment of the Wall Street Journal this week. It said, "In any case, the proper place to make those kinds of risk assessments is within the Executive Branch." He seems to be saying keep it out of the Congress.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's trying to undo what President Ford and George Bush, as Director of the CIA, started in 1976: congressional oversight, Executive Branch control of intelligence. And I think, in view of the errors that were uncovered in 1975 in the Church Committee, that we need some form of controls. And we have worked out a very delicate balance here, a set of compromises in which the Congress does know enough to exercise oversight, but not so much as to blow the necessary secrecy of intelligence.

HEFNER: About controls. Your own dispute with the CIA right now [unintelligible] about your new book. How do we explain that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't have any dispute. I resolved all the issues with them last Tuesday. I now have a manuscript -- everything I've written for my manuscript, rather, is cleared by the CIA. They asked me to take out some things that I don't think are classified, and I'm appealing that to Director Casey. But I do have my manuscript basically cleared. And that's got to be a give-and-take, because people have different opinions about what is secret and what's not.

HEFNER: Who makes the final decision?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Mr. Casey. Or if -- you know, if it really comes to a complete showdown, it's just like anything else in our country of this nature. It goes to the courts and the courts decide.

LEVITAS: If I may change the subject from secret wars for a minute to a discussion of nuclear strategy. If you were a member of the Congress, would you have voted in favor of the

recommendations of the Scowcroft Commission, roughly to finance the MX and to plan in 10 or 20 years for a single-warhead missile? I know you're opposed to the MX. I wonder how far you would have gone with Democrats who also are against the MX, but thought it would be useful at the bargaining table, maybe.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I'm not a politician; and I don't know whether, as a Democrat in Congress, I would have gone alone because I'd be worried about the 1984 election. That would be the only factor, it seems to me, that should swing somebody behind the MX.

The President's promises on arms control I don't think are something one should give him an MX in order to get. The Administration should have been serious about arms control long before this, and they shouldn't be bought off by an MX vote.

In addition, buying the MX is directly contrary to the Scowcroft Commission recommendations on the direction we should be going in arms control, and which the President has bought --that is, to be going towards missiles that are small, mobile, and single warheads. And here we are building a big, unmobile, multi-warhead missile in order, somehow, to get the Russians to go in the opposite direction. It just won't work.

LEVITAS: Do I take that -- are you opposed, then, to the Trident II, the submarine-launched MX?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think the Trident II is a reasonable move to go ahead with because we do need some hard-target capability -- not very much, in my opinion -- in this country for the indefinite future. We don't want to rely on that as our primary deterrent because it isn't necessary. But we need some just as an emergency, just as a reserve, because you don't know what the future is going to be like.

BARTLEY: Admiral, unless I misunderstand the treaties, a small mobile missile would violate SALT I. What do we do about that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It would violate SALT II, I believe. I know it was in SALT II. That we have to negotiate in START, that is going on right now.

HEFNER: Admiral Turner, thank you so much for joining us today on From the Editor's Desk.

In just a moment we'll come back to the Editor's Desk to see how my colleagues will set in perspective what we've just heard.

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HEFNER: Gentlemen, your comments. Mike?

LEVITAS: I think that the Admiral needs more lessons in political reality. Even the case in which he cites, of freeing the Iranian hostages, as a nonpartisan, unanimously-supported question -- Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State, resigned over it. I don't think there is a covert activity that would be supported to the degree he demands for success. I really can't think of one.

HEFNER: Bob?

BARTLEY: -Well, I think, as a society, we've got a terrible dilemma here. I think that we're witnessing a kind of aggression by communist forces, particularly in Central America. I mean the Boland Committee itself agrees, the Democratic majority agrees that the Salvador insurgency is being generated and supported from the outside. And we've got to find some way to deal with those sorts of contingencies without plunging in by sending a bunch of Marines. And covert action seems to me a reasonable kind of approach in this kind of a world.

But I don't see any realistic way that we're ever going to have it unless you can get a majority of Congress to cut Congress as an institution out of the process, or at least to very much reduce its oversight.

LEVITAS: I don't think you can cut Congress out of the process, Bob. And also, all you'll get if you pursue covert activities of this kind is hypocritical denials that America is involved, when the logical consequence and other readings will be that it doesn't come from outside this Earth, that there is an action to bring down the government of Nicaragua. I think you're kidding yourself.

BARTLEY: We lived with all those things for a generation and a half after World War II. And I think we can go back -- we'd better off if we went back and lived with them again.

HEFNER: Are you suggesting, Mike, no covert actions?

LEVITAS: I'm suggesting that if we think that the government of Nicaragua is a clear and present danger, then we ought to say so and put the Marines in and call it what we ought to call it and what we did when we supported Greece against the Greek communists, and so on. I don't think you can have it both ways.

BARTLEY: Well -- and I'm sure that if anyone proposed any such thing, the New York Times would be beating down the barricades.

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LEVITAS: I'm not speaking for The Times. I'm trying to speak -- no, no. I think...

HEFNER: All right, gentlemen. That's the point at which I say thanks for joining me today.

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HEFNER: It's easy, though correct, too, of course, proudly to say that ours is a government of laws, not men; and that however much we may or may not trust those who command our intelligence agencies, they must not be above the law, but instead thoroughly constrained by it.

Well, such noble sentiments have the ring of truth about them, to be sure. They sound so right and so democratic, too. Yet they do fly in the face of much of our nation's real-life experience. And we probably do wrong, not well, when we lull ourselves into even thinking that our leaders ever act purely in terms of such platitudes when it comes to matters of national security.

The fact is that no nation in the real world of flesh and bones and an awareness of mankind's nastier intentions can afford to be without its evasions and its secrets. And we dangerously delude ourselves if we think that in the final analysis, indeed even maybe long before that, there is anywhere a leader charged with the responsibility of great power who won't resort to something less than thoroughly open government, who doesn't at times elide matters of state and stealth, shall we say, when he perceives that those times are perilous for the nation and require something more than a rigid adherence to the letter of the legislative act openly arrived at.

The fact is, then, that ours is a society of men, as well as of laws. And what we must do to accommodate that bit of reality, as well as our ancient fictions, is to make certain that we pick for high places and endow with great power only those men whose intelligence and understanding and probity we thoroughly trust.